

‘Stop kidding, I’m serious’: Failed humor in French conversations.

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## Abstract

This article investigates humor as non-bona-fide communication, in the case of humor *produced by the recipient*, while the main speaker is engaged in a serious storytelling, i.e. bona-fide communication. Taking into account the various interactional constraints weighing in on participants’ roles and actions (humor included), and considering that these constraints are even more active in serious storytelling, the aim of this article is *to investigate the switch from BFC into NBFC as a reason of failed humor*. To do so, 105 instances of failed humor were collected from three audio and video recorded conversations taken from the CID corpus. Among them, 56 instances of failure are due to a switch from BFC into NBFC. And among those, 38 were produced in a storytelling context.

## 1 Introduction

The goal of this article is to apply Raskin’s (1985, 1992a, 1992b) distinction between bona-fide communication (henceforth, BFC) and non-bona-fide communication (henceforth, NBFC) to *failed humor in conversation*. More precisely, it is to investigate the consequences of a switch from BFC to NBFC, for the hearer, both on the humor itself and on the interaction.

Concerning (N)BFC, this study will focus on one specific case highlighted by Raskin (1985: 102) i.e. when the speaker produces humor when the hearer does not expect it. Raskin suggests that such a mismatch between the two modes of communication may not only lead to a comprehension issue (1985: 101), but also to an “infelicitous speech act” (Raskin 1992a: 87). For the present study, the positions of speaker and hearer will be inverted: *we analyzed the humorous utterances produced by the participant who is initially in the position of hearer*. In other words, we analyzed the introduction of a NBFC by the hearer in a speaker’s BFC. Moreover, only the cases of switch from BFC into NBFC which led to infelicity were analyzed, eliminating those which led instead to a comprehension issue.

Analyzing humor in conversation implies taking into consideration the various constraints conversation puts on participants. Moreover, focusing on storytelling in conversation, which obeys a different organizational principle than that of the conversation in which it is embedded, if only by being an asymmetrical activity, implies the postulate that the specific organization of storytelling impacts both the production of humor and its reception. Indeed, such an asymmetrical activity distributes specific interactional roles to the participants: a teller (or main speaker) and a recipient (the hearer), with related actions.

Considering humor as a NBFC, this study investigates the consequences of the introduction, by the recipient, of a humorous utterance, into a serious storytelling delivered by the teller. This study will focus on the teller’s negative reactions. Three different types of

responses are highlighted: 1) serious response to the utterance; 2) ignoring the utterance; and 3) explicit rejection of the utterance. They are presented as a continuum according to the degree of non-cooperation the speaker displays faced with the recipient's humorous utterance(s). The responses are analyzed using an interactional approach, which will show that such a switch from the recipient, from a BFC into a NBFC, has two kinds of consequences: on the humor itself, which can then fail; and on the interaction which can then become conflictual.

## 2 Theoretical background

In this section, an overview of Raskin's work on (non)-bona-fide-communication, storytelling and failed humor will be presented.

### 2.1 Bona-fide communication vs non-bona-fide communication

The notion of non-bona-fide communication is presented in Raskin's (1985) chapter 4 of *Semantic mechanisms of humor*. This chapter is undoubtedly the one which has the most deeply impacted the linguistic field of Humor Studies because it is devoted to the notion of *Script Opposition*, the cornerstone of Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humor. In this chapter, as a sort of preamble (an interruption, in Raskin's words: 1985: 100) in order to understand the *Script Opposition*, Raskin presents joke telling as a non-bona-fide communication (1985: 100-104) in contrast to the bona-fide communication introduced by Grice (1975).

As presented by Grice (1975), BFC corresponds to a serious register of communication entirely governed by truth and relevance, two fundamental elements allowing participants to make and give meaning to what they say and hear. More precisely, this serious mode of communication is governed by the "Cooperative Principle" (Grice 1975, henceforth CP) constituted by 4 conversational maxims (*Maxim of Quantity*, *Maxim of Quality*, *Maxim of Relation* and *Maxim of Manner*, Grice: 1975: 45-47). These maxims prescribe a way of speaking that is effective and that offers the hearer a basis to interpret what is being said. In both cases, these maxims highlight the expectations weighing in on the participants' talk. According to the CP, being a cooperative participant means to respect these maxims. Thus, it can be seen as a framework of production and reception which, paradoxically, may be considered a necessary and helpful straitjacket:

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. One might label this the Cooperation principle. (Grice 1975: 45).

Raskin insists that BFC is entirely tuned to *coherence*; that is, on the necessity for participants, "to give meaning to" something:

*Bona-fide* communication is governed by the 'co-operative principle' introduced by Grice (1975). According to this principle, the speaker is committed to the truth and relevance of his text, the hearer is aware of this commitment and perceives the uttered text as true and relevant by virtue of its recognition of the speaker's commitment to its truth and relevance [...], (Raskin 1985: 100-101).

By virtue of the same need for coherence which makes a conversation successful, Raskin opposes to the Gricean CP, a “cooperative principle for the non-bona-fide communication” (1985: 103), constituted by the same 4 maxims but applied to joke telling in order to make joking successful:

- (i) Maxim of Quantity: Give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke
- (ii) Maxim of Quality: Say only what is compatible with the word of the joke
- (iii) Maxim of Relation: Say only what is relevant to the joke
- (iv) Maxim of Manner: Tell the joke efficiently

(Raskin 1985: 103)

In other words, both bona-fide communication and non-bona-fide communication are presented through their components (the maxims) in order to make a message – serious or humorous – successful. In this respect, both BFC and NBFC are cooperative (Raskin 1992a: 87). Furthermore, the reason why Raskin proposes a cooperative principle of non-bona-fide communication is precisely to highlight the *cooperative aspect* of humor or joke telling. In any case, Raskin considers NBFC as subordinate to BFC which would be primary (Raskin 1998: 106).

NBFC is thus the counterpart of BFC, imposing on the participants the same kinds of constraints with the same goal of *coherence*; that is, the *success* of joke telling for the former, and of serious communication for the latter. However, Raskin goes further. Considering that these two registers can be present in a communication, he reminds us that speaker and hearer may or may not be in the same mode of communication. He considers 4 possibilities:

- (110)      (i)      The speaker makes the joke unintentionally
- (ii)     The speaker makes the joke intentionally
- (111)      (i)      The hearer does not expect a joke
- (ii)     The hearer expects a joke

(Raskin 1985: 100)

Mixing these four possibilities results in eight different situations where speaker and hearer can agree or not on the mode of communication in which they are engaged or in which they want to be engaged. In this article, I will focus on one specific situation (110ii-111i) i.e., the situation where “the speaker throws a joke on the hearer unexpectedly for the latter” (Raskin 1985: 102). According to Raskin, in (110ii), humor is produced intentionally in order not to convey any information, but rather, to create a certain effect, i.e. “to make the hearer laugh” (Raskin 1985: 101). In (111i), the hearer does not expect any joke because he is engaged in BFC.

In this latter case, Raskin explains what the consequences of a joke on the hearer’s perception may be:

[...] the hearer does not expect a joke and will initially interpret the speaker’s utterance as conforming to the requirements of *bona-fide* communication. After his attempts to interpret the utterances within this mode fail, he will have to look for an alternative way to interpret it, and this will bring him into the joke-telling mode because, in our culture, joke telling is a much more socially acceptable form of behavior than, for instance, lying and a more frequent form of behavior than, for instance, play acting (Raskin 1985: 101).

As shown by Raskin, not understanding or mis-understanding an unexpected humorous utterance is unquestionably one of the reasons for failed humor.<sup>1</sup> And unquestionably too, this not understanding or mis-understanding can be explained, at least partially, by the fact that NBFC does not respect the four maxims of the Cooperative Principle. Once again, the Cooperative Principle of NBFC is relevant to highlight the necessity each participant has to find a meaning to the current conversation. However, delivering a joke properly does not guarantee its success. As Raskin said (1985: 103): “[...] the hearer of the joke can fail to get it even if the speaker provides all the necessary ingredients and follows all the maxims.” According to him, the reason why a joke can fail despite the respect of the maxims is the presence or absence of two opposite and compatible scripts in the joke:

[...] the maxims [of the cooperative principle for the NBFC], while shedding some lights on the semantics of humor, do not really provide an explicit account of the semantic mechanisms of humor. The latter are, of course, based on the scripts and combinatorial rules of the script-based semantic theory and on the relation of script oppositeness. (Raskin 1985: 103-104).

Indeed, Raskin’s main hypothesis is the full – or part – compatibility of a text with two opposite scripts (Raskin 1985: 99). Both this compatibility and this oppositeness are presented as “necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to be funny” (Raskin 1985: 99). Doing so, Raskin makes the Script Opposition the cornerstone of his semantic theory of humor, and of *humorous competence*.

Moreover, Raskin (1992a) increases the importance of the notion of NBFC by adding two important elements. First, considering more deeply the case in which participants can be in different modes of communication, he evokes the case where one participant voluntarily switches from BFC into NBFC, thus creating an *infelicitous speech act*: “Such a deviation from cooperation cannot be sustained for a long time, and it will be totally infelicitous as a speech act if nobody cooperates with the speaker on it” (Raskin 1992a: 87). Without naming it as such, Raskin evokes a potential conflict between the two modes of communication. Second, confirming the importance which has to be given to NBFC, Raskin considers the introduction of a fifth maxim to his *joke telling Cooperative Principle*:

JT CP may have other maxims as well. Thus, one maxim unparalleled in BF MC CP is the maxim of mode switching which says something like, "Signal to the hearer that you are switching to JT MC." (Raskin 1992a: 87).

Summing up Raskin’s words focusing on the importance of the particularities of BFC and NBFC, we can see the following:

In his early work (1985), Raskin considers

- (i) Simultaneously, the similarities and specificities of the two modes of communication: while BFC is tuned to truth and relevance, NBFC is tuned toward a certain effect on the hearer (basically, laughter)
- (ii) Both are tuned to coherence in order to be successful but in different ways

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<sup>1</sup> Although they are not analyzed here, some instances appear in the data on which this article is based.

- (iii) The necessity of coherence explains the presence, in both modes of communication, of a cooperative principle based on the same maxims. One is applied to the serious mode of communication, and the other is applied to the joke telling
- (iv) The case where two participants can be engaged in different modes of communication (110ii-111i) is considered
- (v) But the only possible consequence considered of such coexistence is an impact on the *comprehension* of humor by the hearer, not the consequences on the interaction itself
- (vi) Which leads Raskin to insist on the importance of the *Script Opposition*

More recently, Raskin (1992a) deepens the analysis of humor as a NBFC:

- (i) He increases the impact that the switch from BFC into NBFC may have on the success of humor
- (ii) He deepens the analysis of the (110ii-111i) case considering that such a mismatch can lead to a “infelicitous speech act”
- (iii) This possibility leads Raskin to consider introducing a fifth maxim in the cooperative principle of NBFC

Such a work leads Raskin (1998) to ‘advocate’ for a revaluation of NBFC which is in any case subordinated to BFC which would be primary. However, although highly attractive, the idea according with BFC and NBFC are equal has to be qualified. Needless to say, both are highly organized (in their own way) and considering both equals is a principled position meaning that humor is, in any case, less important than serious discourse. While Raskin's position is totally acceptable, the data presented here shows another picture. Participants, while they are in conversation, do not always accept to switch into NBFC while they are engaged in BFC. In other words, when two different modes of communication appear simultaneously, only one can remain possible:

Since the bona fide and non-bona fide modes require different sets of interpretation rules, the dialogue cannot be continued successfully (or, at least, without leading to an interpersonal conflict) until a common mode is established. (Shilikhina 2018: 71).

Analyzing the coexistence of these two modes of communication in genres other than conversations, Shilikhina (2018) shows that both have to be framed enough to be recognized as belonging to one or the other mode, and both have to be negotiated and might be rejected. This notion of negotiation converges with Raskin's (1992b) study on “non casual language”. He points out that while BFC is an idealization, the notion of *cooperation* “seems to be a more essential and more realistic phenomenon than BF.” (1992b:24). And indeed, focusing on the mismatch between the two modes of communication, the present article also highlights the importance of the *notion of cooperation per se*.

To sum up, focusing on Raskin's work on humor as NBFC and applying it to conversations, I will analyze instances of failed humor in conversation. To this end, I will simultaneously consider two different but interconnected phenomena: humor as NBFC on the one hand, and the conversation itself through the interactional constraints it imposes on the participants, on the other hand. More specifically, I will analyze instances of failed humor appearing in a specific conversational activity: storytelling. If a conversation is generally considered a symmetrical activity, storytelling is not. It is an asymmetrical activity where participants have specific roles – of teller and recipient. I will show that not only do they have these specific roles, but moreover, they sometimes want to keep them as such.

Leaving apart the fact that a voluntary switch from BFC into NBFC can lead to a comprehension issue, I will follow Raskin (1992a) in saying that such a switch can lead to an “infelicitous speech act”. Even if one may consider that the more this switch is framed as such, the more it may be accepted by the speaker, the data also show that it is not always sufficient. In this article, I will suggest that, a voluntary switch from BFC into NBFC:

- (i) Can create more than an “infelicitous speech act” including a real interactional conflict between the participants (Priego-Valverde 2003)
- (ii) Has indeed to be signaled, but this signal does not guarantee its acceptance
  - a. Because the signal is not clear enough
  - b. Because, even in the presence of a clear signal, the hearer does not still accept the switch

In other words, agreeing with the fact that the presence of two compatible and opposite scripts present in an utterance are necessary to make it humorous, it is not sufficient. In conversation, I suggest that another element is necessary for humor to be successful: its *legitimacy*.

## 2.2 Storytelling in conversation

Since the seminal work in *Conversation Analysis* (Sacks et al. 1974), the interactional machinery of a conversation has been analyzed in depth. Equally, the literature about storytelling in conversation is more than substantial. Besides the general organization of storytelling, (see Labov and Waletzky 1966; Jefferson 1978; Norrick 2000; Stivers 2008; Mandelbaum 1989, Mandelbaum 2013; Selting 2000; Bavelas et al. 2000), specific kinds of storytelling have also been studied such as complaints (see Mandelbaum 1991/1992; Selting 2010, Selting 2012) and humorous storytelling (see Sacks 1974; Selting 2017). In this section, I will focus on some relevant work on storytelling in conversation.

### 2.2.1 General storytelling organization

Various structural particularities of storytelling that differ from the organization of the conversation in which the storytelling appears have been highlighted. First<sup>2</sup>, because storytelling is considered an “extended telling” (Schegloff 2007), or a “large project” (Selting

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that while all the structural specificities of the storytelling are necessarily presented here successively, they are in fact highly interrelated.

2000), it has a specific sequential organization which diverges from the canonical adjacency pair and “during which participants are oriented to a *suspension*<sup>3</sup> of normal turn-taking rules” (Stivers 2013: 200). The turn-taking system relevant to storytelling is analyzed more in depth by Mandelbaum (2013: 493):

[...] the telling of a story usually requires extended turn-at-talk on the part of the teller, and a passing up of the opportunity to take turns, on the part of the recipient – a suspension of the ordinary turn-taking arrangement of conversation that guarantees a speaker only one turn-taking unit of talk [...].

In other words, because participants are in storytelling, the teller may legitimately require the right to extend his/her own turn while the recipient may have the right to pass on his/her turn.

Second, the goal of a storytelling is different from the rest of the conversation in which it is inserted, and more particularly, from other adjacency pairs: while an adjacency pair is usually defined in terms of actions (such as question/answer), a storytelling is oriented to the establishment of a *stance* toward an event (Stivers 2013).

These two specificities combine to create a third one: storytelling is an asymmetrical activity (Stivers 2008; Guardiola and Bertrand 2013) which not only impacts the conversational turn-taking system, but allocates to the participants specific interactional roles with related actions.

## 2.2.2 Interactional roles of teller and recipient

Following Stivers (2008: 34), the teller has to keep the floor “until story completion” in order to convey a stance for the recipient, while the recipient has to align (i.e. to react in a way which facilitates the ongoing narrative) and to affiliate (i.e. to adopt or support the teller’s stance) with the teller. This is the reason why the participants are divided in teller (or “main speaker”, Guardiola and Bertrand 2013) and recipient.

### *Cooperation between teller and recipient*

But if participants’ roles and actions are specific, they are also deeply complementary: “[...] both participants actively participate and work together to construct the narrative.” (Guardiola and Bertrand 2013: 2). From the teller side, conveying a specific stance toward the event s/he relates is not only a duty, it also provides help both for him/herself and for the recipient. The teller has to deliver a stance in enough of a recognizable way to ensure, as far as possible, both understanding and agreement from the recipient, i.e. his/her alignment and affiliation:

The teller’s stance, and the extent to which this is conveyed, is a crucial resource for recipients, as it makes available the teller’s expectations regarding how the events of the storytelling are to be responded to. (Mandelbaum 2013: 499).

Concomitantly, recipient’s responses are “crucial” (Mandelbaum 2013: 501) for the progress of the teller’s storytelling. Recipient’s responses can be thus divided into two categories. While a “preferred response” (Jefferson 1978) “mirrors the stance that the teller conveys (Stivers

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<sup>3</sup> My emphasis

2008: 33), a dispreferred response may disrupt the ongoing telling. In other words, *storytelling* is *co-constructed*.

#### *Non-cooperation between teller and recipient*

Cooperation between teller and recipient promotes the progress of the storytelling. Each participant is, in some way fulfilling his/her own role and duty. By contrast, a non-cooperation between participants may endanger the ongoing activity. This non-cooperation may come from either the teller or the recipient. While the teller may not deliver enough information for the recipient to follow and/or to give him/her the possibility to participate, the recipient may also disrupt the storytelling. A recipient's disruption can be due to a disaligned answer such as competing for the floor, and / or a disaffiliative answer, i.e. not adopting the teller's stance (Stivers 2008).

Mandelbaum (1991/1992), highlights various recipient's devices allowing him/her to disalign and/or disaffiliate from the teller, which the author labels "disattending." Thus, acting on the structure itself of the storytelling, the recipient can point out a detail of the teller's discourse to focus on it and to make it the new topic. S/he can also react by talking about him/herself instead of responding to the teller's story. Finally, acting more on the teller's stance, the recipient can react proposing another stance. All these disattended answers are a sign of non-cooperation that have to be managed by the teller:

In the course of working this out, the original speaker of the disattended matter has the option of pursuing it, or of dropping it, perhaps in favor of pursuing something else, or pursuing it later. (Mandelbaum 1991/1992: 135).

#### **2.2.3 Serious storytelling vs humorous answer**

The common point of many of these studies, at least of the recent ones, is the essential role of the notion of *stance* perceived as a reference point thanks to which a storytelling may be considered successfully achieved or not. On the one hand indeed, the notion of *stance* characterizes storytelling as a conversational activity in its own right, with its specific organization: it makes it a particular activity tuned toward its delivery and not toward actions. On the other hand, this notion of *stance* dictates participants' actions and duties: it has to be successfully delivered by the teller and agreed on or adopted by the recipient.

However, while this essential role of the stance has been carefully analyzed and demonstrated, and disaffiliative answers have also been studied, one specific case concerning storytelling has received less attention thus far. It concerns the teller's serious stance to which the recipient opposes a humorous stance rather than adopting a serious one. To the best of my knowledge, when this case is considered, the humorous answer is positively perceived, i.e. as an "embellishment" of the story (Goodwin 1997: 80). The present article investigates this specific case of a recipient's humorous answer to a serious storytelling and highlights the possibility that humor is not always considered an embellishment by the speaker.

#### **2.3 Failed humor in conversation**

While researchers in Humor Studies agree that failed humor was neglected for a long time, they note that important work has been conducted on failed humor since the 1990s. These studies can be divided into three categories.

The first category concerns studies about reactions to humor – or teasing and/or irony – (among others, Hay 1994, Hay 2001; Eisterhold et al. 2006; Attardo 2002; Bell 2009). In such studies, without always explicitly naming humor as failed, negative reactions to it have been highlighted, making, *de facto*, humor which triggered such answers a form of failed humor. In these studies, failed humor is not the observable phenomenon *per se*.

The second category of studies consists of transposing a framework of successful humor to failed humor, and thus determining the reasons for the failure. As one example, Bell (2015) offers a reinterpretation of Hay's model of successful humor (2001). Thus, "humor may fail when it is a.) not recognized, b.) not understood, c.) not appreciated, d.) not fully agreed with, and e.) not engaged with." (Bell 2015: 28). This reinterpretation has the merit of integrating interactional reasons to failures. But here again, failed humor is addressed through successful humor.

Finally, the third category of studies focuses on the reasons of the failure, but considers failed humor as an observable phenomenon *per se*. Various models are proposed, listing many possible reasons for the failure. Focusing on humor in interaction, Hay (1995 and 2001) lists eight reasons why humor can fail, from the analysis of the humorous item *per se*, to the impact such an item may have on the ongoing interaction (such as disrupting it). More recently, Bell and Attardo (2010) have proposed another framework, which was revisited by Bell (2015). These two last models, probably the most complete thus far, integrate different linguistic levels (such as semantic, pragmatic, lexical), associated to the analysis of humor *per se* (through the notion of incongruity) and taking also into account social and interactional functions of failed humor. In her revision of the Bell and Attardo (2010) model, Bell (2015) integrates the question of the humorous frame, which can be considered NBFC. However, although essential for my own analysis in the present paper, the frame is considered in this model as an element which can inhibit comprehension and not as an element which can be refused. However, this question of acceptance or refusal of the frame has been highlighted by Priego-Valverde (2003) and Priego-Valverde (2009) within a Bakhtinian approach of (failed) humor. Thus, in Priego-Valverde (2003) and Priego-Valverde (2009) the main reason advanced to explain the failure of humor was the fact that sometimes, because of the way humor is delivered, it might render a speaker's utterance so opaque that the hearer does not even know if s/he is faced with humor or not, i.e., s/he does not know which frame they are in.

Although these studies inevitably include some gaps, taken together they offer a robust image of what failed humor is. Consequently, in this article, I do not want to attempt to propose another model. I will just pull some strands out of this previous work and will link them to some interactional constraints weighing in on the participants of a conversation. For this reason, I will deliberately exclude the comprehension level – which is however essential in failed humor – in order to focus on one interactional reason of failure: the more or less obvious rejection of humor because it is seen as non legitimate or parasitic.

To sum up, in this article, I will analyze instances of failed humor in conversation, and more precisely, instances of failed humor when participants are engaged in a serious storytelling. This specific setting simultaneously takes into account various elements of storytelling in conversation:

- (i) That conversation is, *in principle*, a symmetrical interaction, that allows the hearer to feel free to intervene into the speaker's talk. All the more so when all the participants are good friends (see Section 3)
- (ii) But storytelling, seen as a conversational activity, is an asymmetrical one. The conversational rules are thus different, as well as the participants' actions. Because a participant is the main speaker (or teller) and the other the recipient (or hearer), the former has the right to keep the floor longer, while the latter has to produce preferred responses at specific moments. These specific responses must be aligned and affiliated, and hence, facilitate the ongoing storytelling
- (iii) If the recipient provides a disaligned and/or disaffiliative answer, the ongoing storytelling might be disrupted

Applied to the examples of my data, i.e. a humorous intervention from the hearer, while the speaker is engaged in a serious storytelling:

- (i) The hearer does not provide a preferred response and he thus disaligns with the teller, allocating himself a turn which does not belong to him, which may create a conflict over control of the floor
- (ii) He also disaffiliates, adopting another stance or, switching in another mode of communication. In doing so, he does not collaborate to the ongoing activity
- (iii) He takes the risk, not only to disrupt the ongoing storytelling produced by the teller, but, as it is the case in the data, to see his humorous attempt more or less obviously rejected for two reasons. First, because he left his role of hearer, granting him the right to be a speaker, or at least, a co-speaker of the telling. Second, because he also imposed a different frame of the telling, avoiding adopting the serious teller's stance.

### **3 Corpus and methodology**

#### **3.1 Description of the corpus**

The “CID” – Corpus of Interactional Data – (Bertrand et al. 2008) includes 8 one-hour French face-to-face interactions. They were recorded in an anechoic room at Aix-Marseille University, France. Each speaker was wearing a microphone and both were filmed by a single camera. All the participants were French native speakers and members of the university (students, scholars, or staff members).

Two tasks were performed: half of the participants had to tell unusual stories while the others had to relate stories about professional conflicts they had experienced. Despite this protocol and the setting, this data is considered as very close to natural conversation because of the context: the duration of each recording (one hour) allowed the participants to deviate from

the initial task; they were familiar with the anechoic room and, most importantly, the participants in each pair were close friends outside of the university.

For the present article, three interactions taken from the corpus were studied; two about conflicts (EB\_SR; AP\_LJ) and one about unusual stories (AG\_YM). All involved only male participants.

### **3.2 Annotation scheme methodology used**

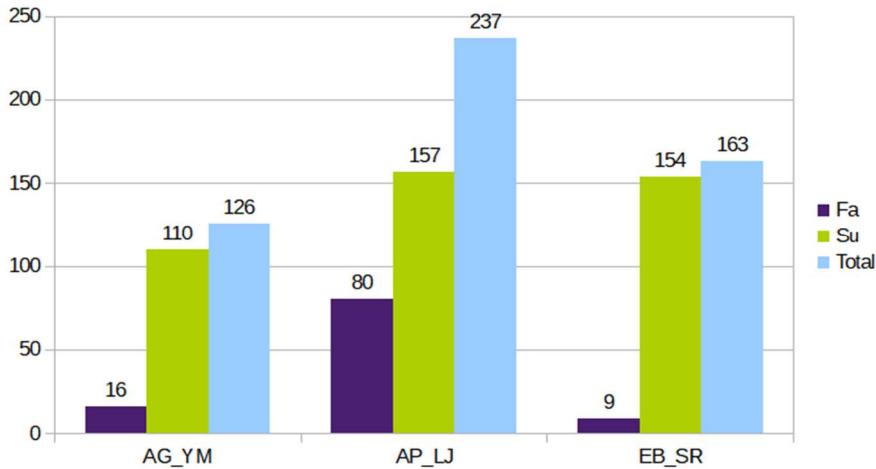
Each audio signal was automatically segmented in Inter-Pausal Units (IPU), i.e. blocks of speech bounded by silent pauses over 200 ms, and time-aligned to the speech signal. An orthographic transcription was then provided at the IPU-level to include all phenomena occurring in spontaneous speech (such as hesitations, repeats, etc.). The transcription used was the *Enriched Orthographic Transcription (OTIM projet*, Blache et al. 2009). Using Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2009), systematic annotations related to the different linguistic domains were also provided. Only manual orthographic transcription and automatic detection of laughter were used in this study. The location of humorous instances was manually annotated and information related to the humor was shown on seven different tiers:

- Tiers 1 and 2: Participants'\_IPU
- Tier 3: The whole humorous sequence
- Tier 4: Successful or failed humorous item(s) produced by Participant 1, in the humorous sequence
- Tier 5: Successful or failed humorous item(s) produced by Participant 2, in the humorous sequence
- Tier 6: Humorous items produced in story-telling specifically
- Tier 7: Reasons of failure (non-understanding, switch from BFC into NBFC)

In order to investigate failed humor due to a switch from BFC into NBFC by the recipient while the teller is engaged in a serious storytelling, three methodological restrictions were enforced. Specifically, only the following instances of humor were analyzed: (i) failed humorous items produced in a storytelling; (ii) by the recipient and not by the main speaker; (iii) only when the reason of the failure identified was a switch from BFC into NBFC.

### **4 Description of quantitative data**

In this section, a quantitative description of the data will be presented.

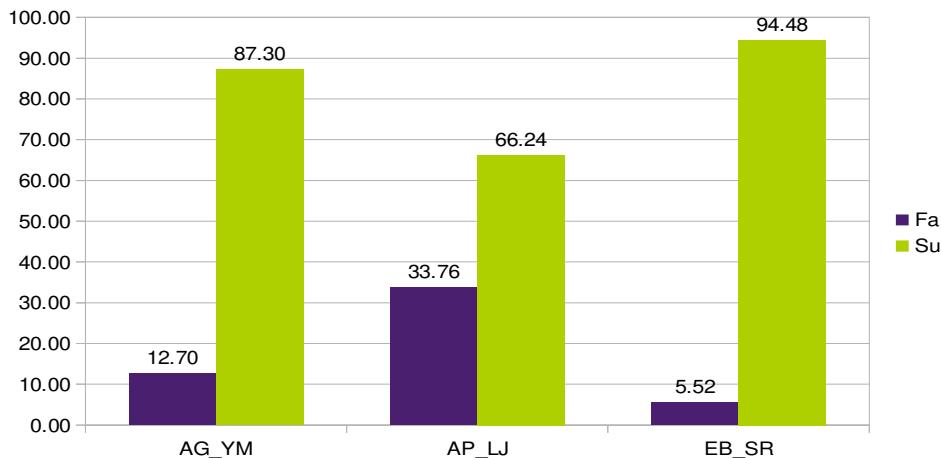


*Figure 1. Number of failed and successful humorous items by interaction*

Figure 1 highlights the very high number of occurrences of humor in these one-hour conversations. This is due to a methodological choice. In order to investigate both the way the speaker reacts to recipient's humor and the interactional consequences of such a humorous item, all the humorous items were extracted and not only the humorous sequences, as a whole.

More importantly, this figure shows a high degree of variation concerning the total number of humorous items produced in each interaction. AP\_LJ produce much more humor than the two other pairs regardless of the fact that AP\_LJ were telling conflict narratives rather than unusual stories. This result may be explained by the nature of the relationship between the participants. While all are friends who know each other outside the university, AP and LJ are the two participants who knew each other the most. They have been very close friends and co-workers for many years and share a lot of non-work-related activities.

This figure shows also high variation concerning the amount of failed humor. Here again, AP\_LJ produce much more failed humor than the other participants. The difference is clearer in figure 2 which indicates the percentage of the humorous productions in each interaction.



*Figure 2. Percentage of failed and successful humorous items by interaction*

In this figure, the high variability of the results appears more clearly. A third of the humorous items produced by AP\_LJ fail. This percentage represents *half* of their own humorous productions which are much higher than the other participants' production. The impact of the nature of their relationship is here questionable. Indeed, this result suggests that if the level of mutual acquaintance may be correlated to the amount of humor produced, it is not also correlated to the success of humor. In other words, a high level of acquaintance not only does not guarantee the success of the humor, but at least in these data, it leads to a very high percentage of failure. Rather, the participants appear to act as if good friends would feel authorized to reject humor or to show explicitly their lack of understanding. In other words, because of their closeness, they appear to act as if the importance of maintaining "face" (Goffman 1967) is thus diminished (Priego-Valverde 2003).

This last interpretation seems to be confirmed by figure 3 which shows the percentage of failed humor because of a switch into a NBFC.

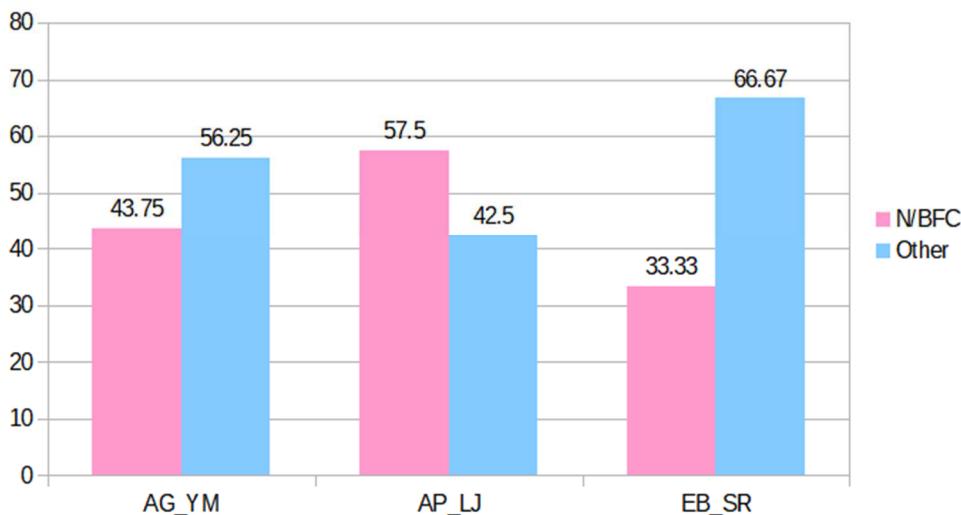


Figure 3. Percentage of failed humor due to a switch into NBFC

The reasons for failed humor other than a switch from BFC into NBFC are beyond the scope of this paper and are not discussed in detail. Mainly, they concern understanding issues. Figure 3 shows that while the results are more homogeneous among the three interactions, once again, AP\_LJ stand out from the other pairs. While the reasons for failure in the cases of AG\_YM and EB\_SR concern more questions of understanding, with AP\_LJ, the main reason is a switch from BFC into NBFC. In other words, the problem between them is less the fact they do not understand humor, but rather that they reject it. Such a result, highlighting the switch as the main reason, seems to confirm that the more participants know each other, the less significant the maintenance of face becomes.

However, figure 4 highlights another possible reason: the kind of conversational activity in which participants are engaged.

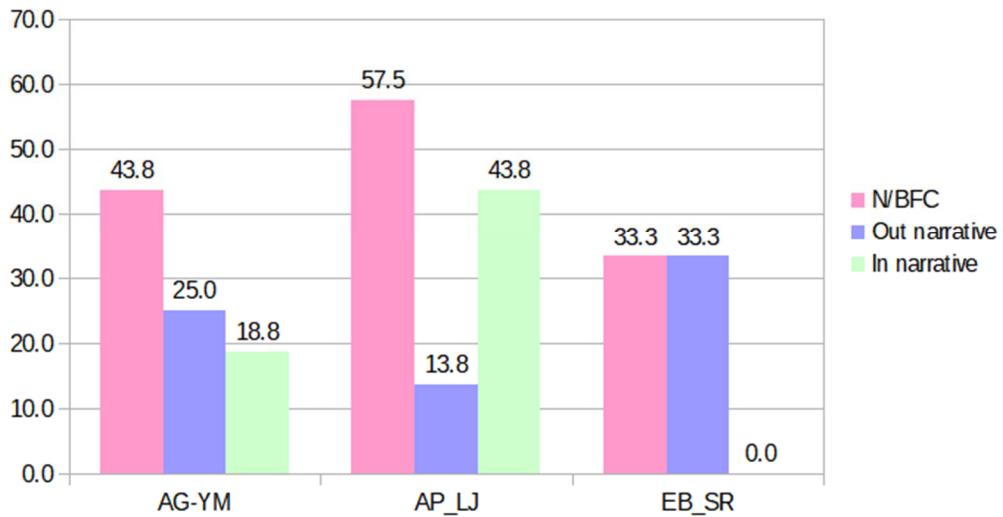


Figure 4. Percentage of failed humor due to NBFC, produced within or outside of storytelling

This figure shows various results. First, there is a major difference between the distribution of failed humor according to the type of conversational activity where it appears. EB\_SR did not produce any failed humor in storytelling. All the instances of failed humor in their exchanges are produced in other kinds of activity, mainly, argumentation. Second, the results concerning AG\_YM's production is more homogeneous. While their failed humorous items are more frequently produced outside of storytelling, the results remain quite balanced. Here again, the most remarkable results concern AP\_LJ. The majority of their production of failed humorous items is produced in storytelling. Such a result seems to confirm previous analysis of storytelling (see Section 2.2 as an *asymmetrical activity* where participants are distributed as main speaker (the teller) and recipient, with related roles, duties and actions. It seems that if the main speaker is engaged in a serious storytelling, the recipient cannot easily switch into another mode of communication which has not been chosen by the teller. As will be shown in the next section, such a switch would be considered disaligned and disaffiliative. In other words, even in order to produce humor, it would be better – not to say expected – for the recipient to stay in the teller's chosen mode.

## 5 Sequential analysis of some examples

In this section, only instances of failed humor appearing in two conversations will be analyzed. This is because when EB\_SR produce failed humor (much less than the other pairs), none of their instances are produced in storytelling. Two examples from AG\_YM will be analyzed, and the conversation the most frequently represented in this analysis will be AP\_LJ. First, because, as shown in the previous section, these two participants are the most prolific, both in humor and in failed humor. Second, because it is between them that the switch into NBFC creates interactional conflicts.

The six examples of failed humor analyzed here are produced by the recipient while the teller is engaged in a serious storytelling. In other words, the recipient not only switches into a NBFC while the speaker is in a BFC, disaffiliating with the speaker, but also disaligns, taking

upon himself to produce a speech turn at a moment when the speaker's activity (storytelling and more, specific moments of the storytelling) does not allow it. In front of such "non-authorized" answers, the speaker reacts differently: from awareness of the hearer's utterance, but in a serious mode, through unawareness, to an explicit rejection of it. Thus, the examples will be presented through a continuum according to the degree of non-cooperation the speaker displays when reacting to the recipient's humorous item(s).

### 5.1 Humor utterances answered seriously

In this sub section, two examples of failed humor will be analyzed. In both cases the main speaker responds through a "po-faced" answer (Drew 1987): i.e., the disaffiliative turns are taken into account, but they are responded to in a serious way; that is, the same serious mode in which the speaker is already engaged. In this case, the hearer's utterances are taken into account, integrated into the speaker's talk (since he reacts) but their humorous dimension is disregarded. Whether the main speaker recognizes the hearer's humorous intention as such or not, he does not display any form of recognition (Drew 1987). That is the reason why these two examples are considered as failed humor.

#### Example 1: The student / L'étudiant

1 AG: et + assez assez agé tu (v)ois il d(e)vait avoir la [quarantaine, quarantaineu] donc c'(é)tait  
2 l'étudiant tu vois qui venait faire euh  
3 YM: attardé mh @  
4 AG: pas attardé si tu veux mais tu vois qui gen(re) à quarante ans en inde / il avait besoin de  
5 faire euh un euh un certificat ou un truc il venait là  
6 YM: ouais

1 AG: and + quite old you know he should be in his forties so he was a student you know who  
2 came to er  
3 YM: retarded mh @  
4 AG: not retarded if you want but you know who kinda at 40 years old in India he needs to have  
5 a er a er a certificate or something he came there  
6 YM: yeah

AG is recalling student memories. When he was student, he lived for a short time in a foreign country, renting an apartment with other foreign students from various kinds of countries and of all ages. In (1), AG is in the beginning of his storytelling, the *orientation* phase (Labov and Waletsky 1966) where he only sets the scene. In this *orientation* phase, AG talks about one of the students who was around 40 years old. Line (3), YM, the recipient, latches onto the student's age and qualifies him as "retarded". In doing so, he plays on the double meaning of the French word "attardé" ("late" and "retarded"). Framing his utterance as obviously humorous (he laughs at the end), YM signals he is switching into a NBFC and thus, that the meaning "retarded" has to be chosen. But, as Stivers (2008) shows, at the beginning of a storytelling the preferred responses produced by the recipient are more or less feedback only produced in order to help

the progression of the storytelling, until “story completion.” By producing, at that moment, a commentary on AG’s character and moreover, in a humorous mode, YM disaligns and disaffiliates with AG. In (4-5), AG shows this disalignment when he reacts seriously to YM’s humorous utterance. By refusing its humorous dimension, he confirms he is, and he wants to stay in a BFC. YM’s utterance is also highly disaligned. Pointing out a detail in AG’s story (Mandelbaum 1991/1992), YM clearly disrupts the ongoing telling. AG is indeed forced to interrupt his telling, to “excuse” the Indian student and to justify why, at around 40, he is still a student. In (6), with a feedback response, YM accepts both AG’s explanation and the assertion of his serious mode of communication. With YM “back into line”, the storytelling can continue.

Example (2) shows a similar pattern, but one in which the recipient’s humorous utterance is produced as an overlap.

### **Example 2 : Italians are good searchers / ils fouillent bien les Italiens**

1 LJ :il casse et en plus il a un peu tendance à s’acharner quoi moi je me souviens y avait un  
 2 fouilleur italien qui était venu  
 3 AP : mhm  
 4 LJ : euh bon il était spécial et euh ben pas  
 5 **AP : ils fouillent bien les italiens hein**  
 6 **AP : ils ont une réputation de fouilleurs**  
 7 LJ : pas trop parce qu'ils ont des ouvriers euh payés  
 8 AP : @ d'a  
 9 LJ spécialisés  
 10 LJ : su pu sur les chantiers de fouille  
 11 LJ : qui sont là pour faire ça quoi  
 12 AP: mhm

1 LJ: he breaks and in addition he tends to persist so I do remember there was an Italian  
 2 searcher who came  
 3 AP: hm  
 4 LJ: err well he was special and err well not  
 5 **AP: they search well the Italians don't they**  
 6 **AP: they have a reputation of searchers**  
 7 LJ: not that much because they had paid workers err  
 8 AP: @ ok  
 9 LJ: specialized  
 10 LJ: on the excavation sites  
 11 LJ: who are there to do that so  
 12 AP: mhm

When he was younger, LJ, the main speaker, studied Archeology. Used to going to various excavation sites, he is telling a story about one of his previous experiences and, more specifically, he is talking about an Italian man who was there at the same time than him. In lines (1 to 4), after having set the scene and, more particularly, the Italian character of his story (not transcribed here), LJ is engaged in the *complication* phase (Labov and Waletsky 1966) where,

as main speaker, he explains the situation to the recipient. Similarly to the *orientation* phase, the *complication* phase allows the teller to present the event, before the *climax* (Selting 2017). In (3), AP aligns with LJ by producing affiliating feedback; however, in (5-6), he overlaps with LJ's disfluent utterance in order to produce two humorous items. AP's disalignment and disaffiliation are inseparable here: AP overlaps twice on LJ's talk, while LJ has difficulties with his own talk. AP neither helps the speaker to find his words nor stays silent, but instead switches into a NBFC. Moreover, AP's utterances are irrelevant and are totally meaningless. One may think that such a switch is produced both to make fun of the Italian character depicted as "special", and to destabilize LJ. As in the previous example, LJ reacts seriously to AP's utterances in line 7. And again, this serious answer in order to going back to a BFC, forces the speaker to interrupt the progress of his telling. After a laugh, AP produces feedback showing that he has abandoned the NBFC he introduced.

In these two examples, the recipients want to switch into a NBFC while the speakers are not only engaged in a BFC but in a storytelling. Thus, in both cases, their humorous interventions disaffiliate with the speakers' talk. Indeed, the speakers at those moments give no sign that the hearers should interpret their stories as humorous. The recipients' humorous utterances can thus be considered by the speakers as illegitimate and disaffiliative because not only do they display a (humorous) stance that the tellers do not want to display, but also because the recipients choose the teller's stance in their stead. Moreover, the hearers' utterances are also highly disaligned. The fact that they claim a speech turn too early forces the tellers to justify their words which leads to a disruption of the ongoing narrative. In both examples, the recipients' utterances are parasitic for the progression of the storytelling and their humorous dimension are illegitimate, or at least, considered as such by the main speakers. Consequently, in both examples, producing a "po-faced" answer, i.e. treating the hearers' humorous interventions as if they were relevant in a BFC while they are clearly a sign of NBFC, allows the speakers to go back faster to a BFC and to their storytelling, thus limiting the damage.

## 5.2 Humorous utterances ignored

In this sub section, two examples are analyzed. Contrary to the previous examples where the meaning of the hearers' utterances was negotiated in a BFC, here, the hearers' humorous utterances are simply ignored.

### Example 3 : Great idea / Super idée

- 1 AP : ouais je sais plus il s'était passé une histoire avec euh un mec {qui, qu'il} connaissait qui
- 2 avait soit disant branché par internet euh euh euh une saoudienne euh quoi
- 3 LJ : mh mh
- 4 AP : et soit disant la f famille a été m mise au courant je sais p
- 5 **LJ : super idée @**
- 6 AP : je s je peux pas te dire euh comment pourquoi etc
- 7 AP : mais le mec il a eu des problèmes quoi
- 8 LJ: ah ouais

1 AP: yeah i don't remember something happened with err a guy he knows who pretended to  
 2 have chatted a saudi girl up through internet err err err a saudi girl you see  
 3 LJ: mh mh  
 4 AP: and supposedly the family has been notified I don't know  
 5 **LJ: great idea @**  
 6 AP: I can't tell you err how why etc  
 7 AP: but the guy he had problems  
 8 LJ: ah yeah

In this excerpt, AP, the main speaker, is telling a story he heard few years before about a man who contacted a Saudi woman via the internet which did not please to the woman's family. At that moment, AP is in the *complication* phase of his story, presenting the situation to LJ before delivering the *climax*, i.e. the fact that the man incurred serious consequences. But LJ (5) does not wait for the *climax* to comment on the situation. In fact, he does not even wait for the end of AP's utterance. Overlapping on the word "family" (4), he produces an ironic and denigrating assessment about the fact that the woman's family heard about the story, blaming in some ways, the responsible party for this denunciation. In doing so, he disaligned with AP, producing a more elaborated turn than a feedback response would be at such a phase of the storytelling. The fact that LJ regularly stages himself as an "expert" of Saudi Arabia because he lived there when he was younger (which will be more obvious in example 5), may explain such utterance. It may also explain that he guessed (even produced in an antiphrastic ironical comment) the follow up of AP's story, (i.e. the "problems" the character had). Precisely because he guessed the follow up of the story before the teller had delivered it, LJ's utterance is disaligned and may explain the fact it is ignored in order to let the speaker say what he has to say. In addition, LJ also disaffiliates with AP. The ironic utterance he produces, framed moreover with a laugh, is a signal of his switch into NBFC while AP, as shown in (7) with the word "issues", considers the story to be serious. That is probably the reason why AP not only does not respond on LJ's utterance, but ignores it, finishing his own utterance (4, 6-7) in a serious mode of communication, until he produces the *climax* of his story, in line (7). As in the previous examples, LJ produces feedback, signaling both the return in a BFC and the fact that he takes into account AP's talk.

Here again, by virtue of the constraints dictated by the activity itself and the effect on the participants' actions, the recipient's humorous utterance failed. Because it was neither the right moment, nor the right mode of communication, the recipient's humor was considered illegitimate by the main speaker.

#### Example 4 : You insist / Tu y tiens

1 YM : § je vais renégocier § mais ça m(e) paraissait pas [juste, justeu] quoi de ouais de de  
 2 sortir mille cinq cent euros  
 3 YM : (l)ors que j'a(v)ais euh  
 4 AG : non en francs  
 5 YM : pas euh francs @  
 6 **AG : @ t'y tiens**  
 7 YM : (l)ors qu(e) j'a(v)ais pas utilisé l'[EMA, eèma] machin bidule donc euh  
 8 AG : ouais ouais ouais ouais

- 1 YM: §i'm going to negotiate again§ but it seemed to me unfair to yeah to to pay 1500 euros
- 2 YM: while I had err
- 3 AG: no in francs
- 4 YM: not err francs @
- 5 **AG: @ you insist**
- 6 YM: while I didn't use the EMA [a machine] thingy so err
- 7 AG: yeah yeah yeah

This extract corresponds to the end of YM's storytelling. The *climax* has been delivered: YM had to fund himself for the few months he spent in a foreign university while he was in a PhD program. In line (1), YM, the main speaker, displays a specific stance about the event he is reporting: it is “unfair”. This extract corresponds to the *evaluation* phase (Labov and Waletsky 1966), which is the more symmetrical phase of this asymmetrical activity (storytelling). Both participants finally share the same information about the event reported and the stance the teller wanted to convey, thus they can both become co-speakers in order to comment the point of the story. But YM, in line (1), is mistaken. Instead of saying “francs”, the French currency at the moment when the event related happened, he says “euros”. Consequently, instead of affiliating with YM, AG rectifies the term and proposes “francs” (3). In doing so, he further disaligns with YM in that he forces him to interrupt himself and to pronounce the right currency (4). At that moment, YM does not seem to be disturbed; he laughs and frames as self-disparaging his own mistake. Here, contrary to all the examples seen above, AG stays in BFC. Moreover, the fact that AG is points out YM’s mistake makes YM laugh. With his laugh, YM introduces a NBFC. In line (5), AG, the recipient, continues in this NBFC, targeting YM and his mistake directly. He also frames his utterance as humorous. But at this time, his utterance, although respecting the humorous frame initiated by YM, is ignored (6). YM chooses to go back to evaluate his story, to develop the stance he displayed, and to do it in a serious mode of communication. The reaction is totally accepted by the hearer (7).

This example is different from the others in many ways. First, it corresponds to the *evaluation* phase of the storytelling; that is, where both participants share the same information about the event reported and the right to comment on it. From teller and recipient, they can become co-speakers. This fact can explain why AG’s repair (3), although disaligned and disaffiliated, is accepted. This fact can also explain why the speaker himself introduces NBFC whereas he was serious during his telling. Until then, the recipient’s utterance accepted by the speaker is not a humorous one (3), but a repair. By contrast, and this is the second major difference with the other examples, when AG, the recipient, produces a humorous utterance (5), although he only follows YM’s lead, this utterance is totally ignored. Various reasons can explain this failure: (i) YM is explicitly the target of the humorous utterance, (ii) AG talks in a very low tone of voice, as if he did not want to disrupt the ongoing telling, and (iii) YM wants to go back to his story and justify the stance he delivered (the injustice), he thus wants to go back in BFC, even if he was the instigator of the NBFC. Whatever the reason is, this example suggests that even when the participants are distributed in a more symmetrical position, the teller remains the main speaker.

### 5.3 Humorous utterances explicitly rejected

In this last sub section, two examples will be analyzed. Here, the humorous utterances are explicitly rejected by the main speaker. In the first example, the humorous dimension, i.e. the switch from the hearer into NBFC, is clearly rejected.

#### Example 5 : It's European terrorism (C'est du terrorisme européen)

1 LJ : ils ont passé un film crypté de canal plus, un film de cul  
2 AP : @  
3 AP : @  
4 LJ : euh @ mais attends mais c'était incident  
5 AP : @ \*  
6 **AP : § c'est du terrorisme euh européen §**  
7 LJ : non c'es c'es c' r rigole pas c'était incident diplomatique euh limite quoi  
8 AP : putain tu m'étonnes euh  
9 LJ : les mecs ils l'ont très mal pris

1 LJ: they programmed an encrypted movie from canal + a porn film  
2 AP: @  
3 AP: @  
4 LJ: err @ but wait but it was incident  
5 AP: @  
6 **AP: § it's european err terrorism §**  
7 LJ: no it's it's don't laugh it was a diplomatic incident err kind of so  
8 AP: fuck you surprise me err  
9 LJ: the guys they took it very badly

LJ, the main speaker, spent a large part of his childhood in various countries of the Middle East when he was a child. As mentioned in example (3), because of that, throughout the conversation, he tells many different stories about these countries. In addition, he presents himself as an “expert” who knows and understands these countries.

In this excerpt, he is telling a story about Arab Emirates. LJ is engaged into a long storytelling where he relates the fact that many people there have a satellite dish in order to watch foreign channels and more particularly, French channels. Line (1) is the *climax* of his story: one day, in this country which is depicted as highly religious earlier in the conversation, a French TV channel transmitted, by mistake, a porn movie. At that time, LJ does not frame his utterance as humorous. However, considering it as such, or at least highly incongruous, AP, the recipient, laughs (2-3), thus switching into a NBFC. His laughter is briefly followed by the teller's laughter in return (4). In this way, LJ acknowledges how the situation he has depicted can be incongruous and accepts the recipient's switch into NBFC. But immediately after having laughed, in the same utterance (4), he postpones this NBFC (“but wait”) in order to produce his own evaluation: the story was serious enough to be called “incident”. But in (5), AP laughs again, refusing the teller's return into a BFC and persisting in NBFC. AP not only laughs but also in an overlap with serious beginning of LJ's explanation, produces a humorous utterance

based on exaggeration: programming a porn movie in such a country is associated with terrorism (6). Doing so, he stays in NBFC and furthermore, he denigrates the Arab Emirates, making fun of their religiousness.

Comparing the broadcast of a movie, even if pornographic, to terrorism is directly targeting the Arab Emirates. It is so exaggerated that it becomes absurd; as it is absurd to consider such an event serious. At that point, because the *climax* has been delivered (1), the participants are engaged in the *evaluation* phase of the storytelling, which should be more symmetrical and give more opportunities to participate to the recipient. However, AP's utterance is highly disaligned. He overlaps LJ who was going back to BFC in order to express how serious the incident was. But AP does not listen to him and persists in his non-bona-fide denigrating mode of communication. He thus also disaffiliates with LJ's evaluation: it is serious and not funny at all. Because his attempt to postpone NBFC failed in line (4), LJ, (7), explicitly rejects the NBFC introduced and maintained by the recipient. His utterance begins with an explicit "no" as a sign of a return to serious communication (Schegloff 2001) and follows with a rejection of NBFC: "don't laugh". In doing so, LJ rejects both AP's humor and what such humor implies: denigration. LJ, still in line (7) elaborates on the kind of incident: as serious as it as though it had been a "diplomatic incident". This utterance allows LJ to reject the recipient's humor and his maintenance in NBFC at the same time. Moreover, by evaluating his story as serious, LJ reframes it. In doing so, he recovers his position of main speaker, and as legitimate that he claims an image of "expert" of Middle East countries. And indeed, in line (8), AP abandons both the NBFC he has introduced and tried to maintain and his very punctual role of co-speaker, which was refused by LJ. Finally, LJ can develop in (line 9) the reasons why it was a very serious incident.

Even though this excerpt is short, due to the recipient's giving up on the attempt at humor, it is however conflictual, as the overlap and the explicit rejection from the teller show clearly. This conflict concerns two different but related aspects of the recipient's utterances: the fact that they introduce NBFC and the fact that AP wants to become a co-speaker, evaluating the event reported by the main speaker.

On the one hand, because the participants are engaged in the *evaluation* phase of the storytelling, AP, the recipient, wants to collaborate and become a co-speaker. However, his utterance is not only produced in a simple overlap, he overlaps on a return from LJ to BFC. He thus disrupts the teller's ongoing talk in two different ways: by talking at the same time and by wanting to maintain a mode of communication already rejected by LJ. AP's participation and humor is thus considered illegitimate by the speaker. AP's humor is all the more illegitimate in that it is quite aggressive and denigrating.

On the other hand, this example shows also that, even in an *evaluation* phase, participants are still in a storytelling, i.e. an asymmetrical activity. Consequently, faced with an utterance that is considered disaligned and disaffiliative, the teller can claim his role of main speaker and can decide whether or not the hearer's utterances are legitimate or not. In other words, as main speaker, the teller can take things in hand at anytime.

The last example is also a conflictual one, but a longer one because, this time, the recipient resists the attempt at change for a longer time.

### **Example 6 : the excavation site / le chantier de fouille**

1 LJ : en t'es t'es quand même bien handicapé y a des chantiers école  
2 LJ : que d où tu payes euh bonbon je crois qu'y en a un à Lattes,  
3 **AP : tu payes pour fouiller**  
4 LJ : tout ça  
5 LJ : ouais tu tu tu payes ouais mais a tu sors t'as une espèce de pas un diplôme je sais pas mais  
6 enfin d c' c'est § j'ai fouillé à machin et §  
7 **AP : @ tu payes pour faire le manœuvre**  
8 **AP : \* super**  
9 LJ : et là bon c'est c'est  
10 **AP : @ § j'ai un diplôme de fouilleur §**  
11 LJ : si tu veux c'est c'est fait euh  
12 **AP : @ § j'ai tenu une pioche pendant une semaine §**  
13 LJ : c'est un chantier école c'est-à-dire que t'as des cours t'as des cours sur la céramique euh  
14 AP : ah hum hum hum  
15 AP : mh mh ah ouais OK ouais  
16 LJ : euh tout le bordel quoi enfin et c'est c'est quand même complet et et c'est hard mais par  
17 contre euh  
18 AP : ah ouais ouais d'accord ouais ouais c'est pas que creuser ouais  
19 LJ : je crois que j'y suis pas passé mais j'en ai entendu parler de ce site là c'est euh  
20 LJ : c'est pelé y a rien enfin si tu veux  
21 LJ : c'est pas un je crois que c'est pas un site très intéressant quoi tu creuses et tu creuses tu  
22 creuses et @  
23 **AP : @ c'est le site où y a rien à trouver quoi**  
24 LJ : non si mais disons que p m par rapport à des sites où t'as y t'as y te reste des bouts de  
25 monuments des trucs comme ça  
26 **AP : le site des bleus**  
27 AP : mh mh  
28 LJ : euh je crois c'est  
29 LJ : hum hum c'est un peu ingrat quoi  
30 AP : eh ouais d'accord ouais ouais

1 LJ: in you're you're anyway handicapped enough there is a school excavation sites  
2 LJ: from which you pay a lot I think there is one in Lattes  
3 **AP: you pay to search**  
4 LJ: everything  
5 LJ: yeah you you you pay yeah but you fishe you have a sort of not a diploma I don't know  
6 but well it's §I searched at§  
7 **AP: @ you pay to be a worker**  
8 **AP: great**  
9 LJ: and there well it's it's  
10 **AP: @ §I've a diploma of searcher§**  
11 LJ: if you want it's it's been done err  
12 **AP: @ §I've hold a pick during one week§**  
13 LJ: it's a school excavation site meaning you have classes you have classes about ceramics err  
14 AP: ah hm hm hm  
15 AP: hm hm ah yeah ok yeah  
16 LJ: err all the stuff well and it's it's anyway full and and it's hard but however err

17 AP: oh yeah yeah okay yeah it's not only digging yeah  
18 LJ: I think I haven't been there but I heard about this site it's err  
19 LJ: it's peeled there is nothing well if you want  
20 LJ: it's not a I guess it's not a very interesting site well you dig and you dig and you dig and  
21 @  
22 **AP: @ it's the site where nothing is to be found no**  
23 LJ: no yes but let's say that in comparison with sites where you have some rests pieces of  
24 monuments stuff like that  
25 **AP: the site for rookies**  
26 AP: mh mh  
27 LJ: err I think it's  
28 LJ: hm hm it's a little ungrateful well  
29 AP: eh yeah ok yeah yeah

The participants are talking about the same topic as in example (2): the excavation sites LJ knows because he studied Archeology before Linguistics. In this excerpt, there is never any explicit rejection of the recipient's humor as was the case in the previous example (5). All the instances of AP's humor fail because they are answered in a serious way or, because they are ignored. Thus, this example could have been presented in the two previous sub sections. However, both the recipient's insistence in switching to NBFC and the speaker's resistance, make this sequence highly conflictual. Consequently, the way the teller answers the recipient's humorous utterances will be only mentioned in order to focus on the interactional conflict between both participants.

The extract begins in the *orientation* phase of LJ's storytelling: he is explaining the functioning of school excavations sites, explaining that the students have to pay to be there. But LJ does not just mention in passing that these sites charge the students, he also says that they are expensive (2). From this perspective, although he is in the *orientation* phase, LJ produces a personal comment and assumes a *stance* toward what he is telling. AP immediately plays on it (3), framing his utterance at that moment, not clearly humorous – which will be done on turn (7) – but highlighting the fact that it is incongruous by the association of paying and searching i.e. working. In other words, AP entered in the breach opened by LJ. But, pointing out one element of the situation exposed by the teller, such utterance disaligns with LJ because it disrupts the ongoing storytelling. And indeed, LJ has not finished setting the scene. That is probably the reason why he answers in a serious way in lines (5 and 6), repeating and confirming that students have to pay to search, and justifying that point by the fact they receive a sort of diploma at the end, i.e. they pay for something presumably valuable.

Taking the recipient's humorous utterance seriously, he does not take into account its humorous side, which allows him to continue telling his story in BFC. Nonetheless AP persists; in lines 7 and 8, he rephrases his own utterance, but this time, he clearly framing it as humorous (he laughs and makes an ironical comment: "great"). Such insistence added by the ironical comment makes AP's utterances highly denigrating, without knowing if the target of his denigration is the school which organizes such digs or LJ himself who experienced some of these digs when he was a student. Whatever the reason, LJ (9) ignores AP's utterances and attempts to pursue in own story. But AP refuses it. Overlapping on LJ, in (10 and 12), he ridicules LJ's words repeating "diploma" and in fictitious reported speech (see Guardiola and

Bertrand 2013; Bertrand and Priego-Valverde 2011: Priego-Valverde 2018), stages himself as having such a diploma. Here, not only does AP insist in maintaining the NBFC he has introduced while LJ was in BFC and to which LJ wanted to go back, but also, he clearly teases LJ. In line (11), LJ tries again to stay in the BFC he introduced first, answering to AP's teasing in a serious way ("if you want"). His "strategy" seems to work for a while because AP (14-15), produces some feedback answers to finally take into account what is being said in a serious way. Furthermore, he acknowledges the fact that students do other things than just digging (17). Interestingly, while AP has finally accepted the BFC LJ wanted to install by any means, LJ himself switches into a NBFC (lines 20-21), producing the verb "dig" three times, as if he wanted finally also to denigrate such charged work. Paradoxically, while AP follows him in the new NBFC the speaker introduced (22 and 25), LJ returns to his previous reactions: AP's humorous utterance is answered seriously in (22) and just ignored in (25) in order to go back to a serious evaluation of this kind of sites (27-28). This return to BFC is finally accepted by AP.

***The conflict between both participants is remarkable for various reasons.*** The first one and the more obvious is its duration due both to the recipient's instance on switching into a NBFC and the speaker's resistance by staying in a BFC. Moreover the conflict between the two modes of communication is not the only one. An interactional conflict between the two participants and the respective roles they have or claim is also present. Because they are engaged in the *orientation* phase of the storytelling, LJ is the main speaker and seems to want to keep this role. All the kinds of answers he produced to the recipient's utterances highlight this fact: whether he ignores, responds in a serious way, or overlaps the recipient's talk, he keeps talking in the way he has decided. Interestingly, even when he finally frames himself his story as humorous, he refuses the recipient's follow up into a NBFC. He acts, as if the problem was not only the switch into another mode of communication, but the fact that the hearer has an opinion about an event he knows more than him: it is his story and moreover, he is a sort of "expert", the only one thus legitimate to judge, even negatively, the archeology policies.

In other words, this conflict between BFC and NBFC concerns more the recipient's disalignment whose utterances interrupt the ongoing storytelling and forces the teller to justify the usual archeology policies, than his potential disaffiliation: indeed, they both think that paying to search seems, at least, incongruous. The conflict between the two participants is thus more interactional and more related both to their interactional roles in a storytelling activity and to the image of expert claimed by the main speaker.

## 6 Concluding remarks

This article focused on humor as non-bona-fide communication, produced by the recipient, while the speaker is engaged in a serious storytelling, i.e. a bona-fide communication. Taking into account the various interactional constraints weighting in on participants' roles and actions (producing humor included) and considering that these constraints are even more active in serious storytelling, the aim of this article was *to investigate the switch from BFC into NBFC as a reason of failed humor*.

The quantitative results have shown a wide difference between the 3 conversations. AP\_LJ standing out at any point: (i) they produce much more humor than the other pairs, (ii) they also produce much more failed humor, (iii) the switch from BFC into NBFC is the main reason of the failure of humor (more than a half), and (iv) their failed humorous items appear

more than the other pairs in storytelling. Such results tend to confirm the very active constraints the storytelling imposes on participants. Moreover, one could consider that the more humor is produced in serious storytelling, the more it may fail. The first reason is the interactional roles of teller and recipient in story telling: producing humor while a participant has the role of recipient implies to take a potential illegitimate (and sometimes, even parasitic) speech turn. The second reason is that this potential illegitimacy is all the more so as humor produced by the recipient implies also a switch from BFC chosen by the teller into NBFC. Furthermore, AP\_LJ's results raise a question: the impact on humor, and more precisely, on its reception, of the nature of the relationship between the participants. Indeed, if all the participants are friends, AP and LJ are the closest ones. They are intimate friends. Consequently, considering that the more two participants know each other, the more humor may succeed is not confirmed here, and it is even overturned. Two reasons could explain this result. Firstly, one could say that the nature of the conversational activity in which the participants are engaged would counterbalance their close relationship, as if the constraints of storytelling were heavier than their friendship. The second reason would concern the paradoxical effects of such relationship: the more participants know each other, the more they feel authorized to treat negatively the humor produced, as if the stake of face was diminished.

Needless to say, a recipient's humor may succeed, and in fact does, even when produced in storytelling. Focusing on failed humor because of a switch into a NBFC has highlighted to what extent, in serious storytelling, a humorous utterance produced by the recipient may be illegitimate or even parasitic. In each case, the humorous utterances are both disaligned and disaffiliative. They are disaligned because, at a minimum, they are produced in a phase of the storytelling where they are not expected (*orientation, complication*). At the maximum, they are disaligned because they disrupt the ongoing telling. All of them are disaffiliative because through them, on the one hand, the recipient, instead of adopting the teller's stance, displays another stance, a humorous one and, on the other hand, imposes a humorous frame, i.e. a way to interpret the telling, while the main speaker has not yet displayed his own. In sum, when a humorous utterance is produced by the recipient, a switch from BFC into NBFC is intrinsically disaffiliative.

However, it is worth noting that the humorous utterances produced in example (4) are different: they are produced in the *evaluation* phase of the storytelling, i.e. in a phase developed after the delivery of the *climax* and where, usually, both participants can participate. The example shows that, if indeed YM's humor is ignored, it is also produced by the recipient himself in a low tone of voice, as if he did not want the speaker to take it into account, as if he did not want to interrupt the teller.

Focusing on failed humor has also highlighted three negative reactions from the main speaker to the recipient's humor, highlighting thus his non-cooperation presented as a continuum: (i) humor is answered in a serious way. Here, the utterance is taken into account and responded to, but not its humorous aspect. Such answer is the most cooperative negative reaction. Furthermore, it allows the speaker to stay in the BFC he has introduced. (ii) Humor is purely and simply ignored, i.e. the main speaker keeps his speech turn as if the recipient has not participated. Here, if the speaker's cooperation is more than questionable, his "strategy" remains effective: he can follow up his storytelling and, if the recipient's humor is considered

illegitimate, it is not parasitic. Finally, (iii) humor is explicitly rejected. This reaction is undoubtedly the less cooperative. If the three reasons may be considered a conflict between the two modes of communication, which leads itself to an interactional conflict between the participants, the third kind of reaction is the more obvious type of conflict.

All the examples show that the recipient's humor is perceived by the speaker as, at least illegitimate and sometimes parasitic because it may disrupt the ongoing storytelling. In other words, the sequential analysis of some examples confirms not only the significant restrictions the storytelling imposes on participants' roles and duties, but also how much such constraints might be strict. However, example (5) is different: as example (4), the humorous utterance is produced during the *evaluation* phase, i.e. after the *climax*. But here, the *climax* (the TV channel in the Emirates broadcasts, by mistake, a porn movie), does not seem to be the central point of the teller's story. The central point seems to be the stance he wants to deliver, i.e. this broadcast was a very serious event. In other words, for the teller, presenting himself as an "expert" of Middle East countries was more important than the story itself. This shows that the storytelling rules can be also violated by the speaker and that some individual agendas (here, the image of "expert") can legitimate such a violation. In other words, the three speaker's reactions (increasingly non-cooperative) highlight the fact that the teller claims all the time for his role of main speaker and for the correlative rights he has. In this regard, the recipients' cooperation is more questionable. On the one hand, switching to a NBFC is clearly non-cooperative, both because they are recipients and because they change the mode of communication installed by the main speaker. But, on the other hand, most of the time, except in example (4), they frame their humorous utterance as such, in order to help the speaker to follow them in this new mode of communication. In this regard, they are cooperative.

The fact that, most of the time, the recipients frame as humorous their utterances while they still fail tends to confirm the suggestion (see Section 2) according to which signaling a switch into a NBFC from the recipient may remain insufficient for it to be accepted, and hence, successful. Such a result confirms also that, firstly, the question of the *legitimacy* of humor is essential in conversation, and secondly, that this legitimacy is allowed by the main speaker. This legitimacy will be analyzed in more detail in (Priego-Valverde *in preparation*), but the current findings tend to confirm that the interactional constraints of the conversation or of the conversational activity in which humor appears have to be necessarily taken into consideration as a *fundamental element* allowing a better comprehension of conversational humor. They show that conversation is not only a setting where humor appears, but one of its intrinsic characteristics which justifies the terms of conversational humor or interactional humor.

Finally, this study does not answer the question whether BFC is more important than NBFC, even if each time, BFC finally prevailed over NBFC. However, it highlights the fact that two different modes of communication cannot coexist. Obviously further work is needed. On the one hand, the data on storytelling need to be enlarged in order to confirm or not the significance of the storytelling constraints. On the other hand, the results presented here need to be applied to other conversational activities such as argumentation. If the switch into NBFC is less problematic, this further work could confirm that storytelling is a highly constraining activity. On the contrary, if it appears that in another conversational activity, this switch remains as non-cooperative as in storytelling, the conclusion would be different and remarkable: *it could*

*signify that, in the end, conversation is not as cooperative as one would want to think*, since it would share some constraints with non-cooperative modes, such as argumentation.

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### **Conventions of transcription**

@	laughter
:	vocalic extension
+	silent pause
§word§	reported speech
<u>underlined word</u>	overlap
in bold	humorous utterance
*	undetermined noise

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